CHAPTER 38 — THE HOUSE OF RETURNING

Anastasia arrived at the House of Returning on a quiet afternoon, the air washed in the calm silver light that lingered above the northern plains. The restorative complex rose gently from the landscape rather than dominating it—an architecture of invitation, not authority. Glass, timber, and living greenery were woven together so seamlessly that one could not easily tell where the cultivated gardens ended and the building itself began.

This was not a prison. It had never been called one. Yet many people who lived here had once committed acts that shattered the old world's understanding of trust and safety. Under the social norms of a century earlier, many would have died in confinement or lived their final years locked away under concrete, forgotten by the world.

But the House of Returning existed because the new world had taken a different path.

Anastasia stepped through the main entrance, where a broad atrium opened into warm light, drifting scents of soil and green leaves, and the soft hum of a distant waterwall. The atmosphere reminded her less of an institution and more of a botanical sanctuary. Groups of residents—never "inmates"—walked slowly through sunlit hallways or read in alcoves framed by vines.

A young facilitator approached, bowing slightly. "Welcome, Anastasia Mikhailovna. The residents have prepared for your visit."

"I'm grateful," she said. "It's been too long since I last came."

The facilitator smiled. "We've arranged a conversation with someone who wished to meet you."

They walked together toward one of the inner courtyards. Along the way, Anastasia saw residents tending fruit trees, others shaping clay in an open workshop, still others sitting in reflective circles. No one was under guard. No one was shackled. The House ran not on restraint, but on agreements—agreements continually renewed by its inhabitants.

They reached a transparent door that opened automatically. Inside sat a man of perhaps twenty years by appearance—though the record said he was eighty-seven. His longevity treatments had been postponed during the early decades of his sentence, then administered gradually once rehabilitation benchmarks were met. He looked now like someone starting his adult life, not ending it.

"Hello," Anastasia said, sitting opposite him at a circular table surrounded by greenery.

He folded his hands. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. My name is Jalen."

"I know your name," she said gently. "And your story."

Jalen exhaled softly. “The news said a boy did something monstrous. And I did. I was sixteen when I hurt people—killed people—because I was drowning in a loneliness I didn’t understand. I thought making the world hurt would make me seen. It didn’t. It only left me with ghosts.”

Anastasia listened silently, letting his words settle.

“They sentenced me to seventy years,” he continued. “Back then, it sounded like eternity. I thought my life was over. Then the world changed. Longevity changed. Compassion changed. And this place…” He gestured around them. “It didn’t punish me. It peeled me open.”

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“Not by force,” Jalen said. “By letting me meet myself—my past and future selves. They didn’t lecture. They didn’t shame me. They asked me to understand the person I had been, and the person I still could become. And understanding… that hurts more than any cell ever could.”

A pause. Birds sang softly from the rafters.

“I still don’t think I deserve what life I have left,” he said. “But they tell me it’s not about deserving. It’s about choosing.”

“Do you believe that?” she asked.

He looked at her, tears gathering but not falling.

“I’m trying,” he said.

A facilitator approached discreetly and nodded. Jalen inhaled, then continued. “There is something I want to do when I leave in a few years. A calling, maybe.”

“What is it?”

“I want to work with the families of those I hurt. If they let me. Not to ask forgiveness—I don’t think I should ask that—but to build something with them. A memorial garden. A quiet place.”

Anastasia’s throat tightened.

“That is a difficult path,” she said softly.

“I know,” Jalen replied. “But difficult things are sometimes the only true ones.”

They spoke for another hour—about restorative circles, about youth alienation, about the world that had once produced violence reflexively and the one that was slowly learning not to. When the conversation ended, Jalen bowed his head.

“Thank you for seeing me,” he said.

“Thank you for letting yourself be seen,” Anastasia replied.

As she walked back through the House, her steps were slow, contemplative. The walls were alive with ivy. The hallways echoed with soft voices—people engaged in the long, unglamorous work of repairing what had once been broken.

Zarya murmured through the Neural Whisper, “Your heart rate is elevated.”

“Yes,” Anastasia whispered back. “Because I’ve just remembered what hope feels like when it isn’t theoretical.”

And outside, as she stepped into the evening air, the world looked just slightly changed—not because darkness had vanished, but because somewhere inside a House built of humility and second chances, a young-old man was preparing to walk into a future still large enough to hold him.